

St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage, Alaska.
Message from Rev. Israel Portilla-Gómez, Associate Rector. April 23, 2023
Scripture readings: Acts 7:55-60, Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16, 1 Peter 2:2-10, John 14:1-14

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)

I will start sharing my sermon with a meme. When I saw the picture for the first time, I thought: It looks like this monkey heard today's Gospel. Look at the picture. How much faith, how much courage, how much trust in itself... Admirable.



How many times in our lives should we have remembered more insistently these words of Jesus of today's gospel: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. I am the way, and the truth, and the life. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."

Jesus lived through very turbulent and stressful situations in his life. As we know, the social conditions of his time were very different from the life we lead here in Anchorage today. Yet, despite those conditions, he always knew how to create a pleasant and calm atmosphere around him. The power of his loving force was so great that he calmed the hearts of his disciples when they needed it most. He taught them to handle their conflicts, losses, and failures, the same way as he does now with us. It is an invitation to know, love, and follow him.

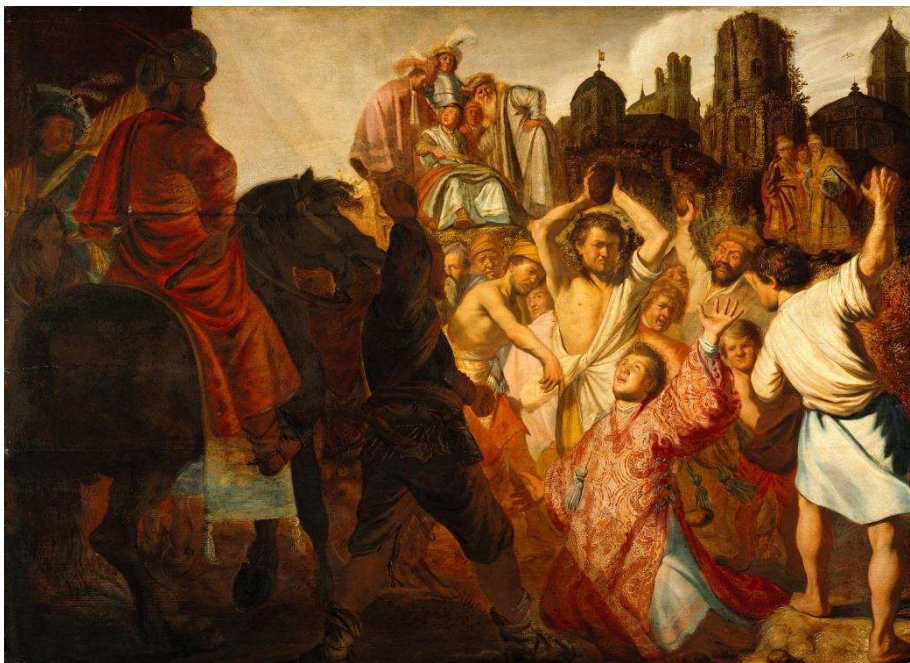
Jesus understands our limitations because he lived as one of us. But he knows it is not necessary to get carried away by problems. There are wonderful things beyond them. Jesus made us understand

that life is more than problems. Our fear of them only intensifies the pain. Facing the troubles in our life is a clever attitude.

Jesus would not eliminate all the obstacles we face along the way. He would not eliminate situations where we are scared and confused. Jesus had never made those promises, as far as I know. But He promised to be with us, to believe when there are doubts, not to be afraid when we are trembling with fear, to walk when we are paralyzed, to have courage in moments of despair, to receive and give forgiveness when we are guilty, ultimately to believe in him, knowing that although the road will be rough and hard, he does not abandon us, his love can be a refreshment to any wound, no matter how big it is. He wants our roots to be so deeply rooted in his love that nothing can tear us away from him.

We find an example of this in the first reading about St. Stephen. Who was he? St. Stephen was a deacon of the early Jerusalem Church and a proto-martyr, meaning he was the first Christian after Jesus killed for his beliefs. A feast in his honor is now celebrated on December 26th, just after the birth of Jesus. Stephen was one of 7 Hellenic Jewish deacons presented to the Apostles to settle a complaint that Hellenic Jewish widows were treated worse than Hebraic Jews in the distribution of community funds. Oh, we see even faith communities have had conflicts from the beginning. Of course, problems have always appeared in life, everywhere, at all times, but the Holy Spirit guided them to solve it.

St. Stephen was intelligent, and his opponents had no way to debate his arguments. So they raised false witnesses and charged him with blasphemy and sentenced him to death by stoning. The witnesses, who had the duty of throwing the first stones, left their coats on the ground at the feet of "a boy named Saul". Does that name sound familiar to you? Saul approved of Stephen's death.



Rembrandt, "The Stoning of Saint Stephen", 1625 Museum of Fine Arts of Lyon

Stephen's life would not be in vain. The courage for his faith testimony has survived until today. We also have churches in memory of his name. For example, here in Alaska, in Fort Yukon, there is St. Stephen Episcopal Church.

How much transformation can a person have after being guided by the love of God? Sometimes the end may not be how we imagined

it, but God knows best.

Today's invitation is to walk with Jesus in the way of love. If we walk with him, it is because we believe in him. We are not alone. Sometimes insecurity leads us to have the same question as Thomas. Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way? And we could add something

typical of our era: I have no time, I am so busy, and there are so many paths; which one to take, Lord? Which direction to take when adversity comes, pain, illness, despair, which Lord? The answer is still the same: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. I am the way, and the truth, and the life. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."